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INDIAN ELEPHANT CORPS UNDER THE GHAZNAVIDS

S. Iahir Raza

Medieval historians Barani (14th century) and Abul Fazl (late 16th century) record the proverbial sayings that one elephant was worth 500 horses in battle,¹ while Al Beruni's ancient account, practically nearer to the fact, equaled one elephant with three horses.² Importance of elephant, in ancient India, may be inferred from the arrangement of the figures on the chess-board where elephants stand next to the king then placed horse.³ By the tenth century, one war elephant was itself considered equal to two ordinary ones in power and strength.⁴ Thus, elephant has been an important war animal in India and there was scarcely any battle of significance where they were not put to good use. Generally, elephantry became psychological force to reckon with in direct battle. This paper seeks to underline the tactical use of the Indian elephants in Central Asian warfare by the Ghaznavids.

Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) of Indian sub-continent figure prominently on rock paintings and seals of Mohenjodaro. While depiction of elephant on seals indicates probably the earliest domestication, the paintings of Bhimbetka, historic period, depict the battle scenes. One 'warrior on elephant back' scene shows three riders with swords, round shield, spear, bows and arrows.⁵ Alexander's medallion (Babylon, c.323 B.C.) depicts two elephant riders of Porus with arms, while Megasthenes reports that each Mauryan war elephant accommodates three archers and a *Mahouts*.⁶ Al- Beruni further elaborates that in ancient time each war elephant accommodates its keeper and behind him the vice-keeper who has to goad the elephant behind the chair, the master (the king) armed with arrows in the chair and together with him his two spear throwing companions and his jester.⁷ Following Indian tradition, the Ghaznavids mounted four mailed spearmen and archers besides *pilhan*.⁸

However, from ancient days elephant was considered as beasts of war and by the 4th century B.C. the Indian kings maintained them in thousands for their armies. Alexander's historians tend to believe that the army of Nandas of Pataliputra consists 3,000 or 4,000 elephants.⁹ In 326 B.C. Alexander confronted with Indian chief Porus who arrayed his 200 elephants in the centre and drawn infantry behind and between them. Elephant attack was serious, but the Macedonians opened their ranks and their cavalry swung round in rear. They attacked the elephant from rear with their long *Sarissae* and finally dislodged

the *mahouts*. The driverless elephants ultimately trampled down their own troops indiscriminately.¹⁰

Although Alexander himself did not use elephants in battle, but he transported 200 elephants to Babylon to which his successors used in their internecine wars. The Mauryan king Chandragupta maintained a large retinue of elephant corps and ceded territorial concessions from the Macedonian Seleucus by extending him 500 elephants. Seleucus placed 480 Indian elephants in the battle at Ipsus (modern Turkey) in 301 B.C. against his contender Antigonus who possessed only 75 elephants. The elephants played a role and Antigonus was defeated.¹¹

From India, elephants were transported to Persia. An Indian king used to send ten elephants every year to Naushirwan. The Sassanid king Khusrau Parvez possessed one thousand and two hundred elephants.¹² At Qadisiyya, in 635 A.D. the Persian Commander Rustam deployed thirty elephants in his centre and their appearance spread terror among the Arabs. But the Arabs finally stopped them by cutting the girths and dislodging the troop laden *haudahs* (umari) and also by attacking vulnerable parts like the eyes and trunks.¹³ By the 8th century A.D. the Khurasanis had considerable number of elephant in their possession. Amir of Khurasan Ali b. Isa b. Mahan once sent five male and two female elephants as gift to the Caliph Harun Rashid.¹⁴ The earliest known representation of an elephant in Islamic art is the so called 'Elephant-Silk' of Khurasan. It depicts two elephants, in yellow colour, confronting each other. Below these two elephants runs a Kufic inscription naming Abul Mansur Bakht-Tegin, an amir of Khurasan whose death took place in 960 A.D.¹⁵ The Buwaihids army of Fakhrud Daula had number of war elephants which he used in the battle against Faiq and placed them in the centre.¹⁶ However, the Samanids of Khurasan and Transoxiana had not paid much importance to elephants as war machine. But it was the Ghaznavids who by the end of the tenth century introduced elephants in their tactical warfare.

The Indian elephants shaped sultan Mahmud's military strategy in two ways: firstly, when he evolved stratagem to demoralized Indian elephants, especially by his Arab soldiers, and managed to capture them. Secondly, the formation of his own elephant corps and their tactical use in Sistan and Transoxiana. Evidences explain his war tactics and application of strategies to fought against the Indian chiefs who arrayed large number of elephants in the battle. Sultan Mahmud marched against the Hindushahiya ruler Jaypala (1001AD) who defended himself in the valley of Peshawar with 12,000 cavalry, 30,000 infantry and 300 elephants arrayed in front line and equipped with swords, arrows and spears. This was the first battle of Sultan Mahmud who fought with

elephantless army, like Alexander the Great, against a strong corps of 300 elephants. The Ghaznavid soldiers attacked elephants with arrows and swords. The mounted archers pierced the elephants legs with arrows which become motionless. Then in close attack, the footmen dared to cut trunks of the elephants with their swords. Consequently fifteen elephants were killed and many captured. Thus sultan Mahmud's able Commandership gained victory.¹⁷ To crush the power of the Hindushahiya in the Salt Range, Sultan Mahmud led expedition against Trilochanpala (1013AD). Trilochapala entrusted the defense of the fort of Nandana to his son Bhimpala, who entrenched himself in a pass and closed the entrance by a strong line of elephants. After receiving reinforcements he came out into the plain having hills behind him and his wings protected by elephants. Bhimpala then ordered an elephants' charge. The Ghaznavid Commander Abu Abdullah Tai, with his Arab soldiers, attacked the elephants. The archer showered arrows on their eyes and footmen chopped their trunks with *Zhupin*, a short two pronged spear. When Abdullah Tai was engaged in demoralizing the elephants, he was encircled by the Indian who inflicted many wounds upon them. The sultan, seeing him in danger, dispatched a group of his slave guards (ghulamān-l-Sarā) for his assistance who brought him out. The sultan ordered him to be placed on an elephant for medical aids (*Jarahat*).¹⁸

On another occasion (1019AD) to block the enroute passage of the sultan, Trilochanpala himself encamped on the eastern bank of the river Rahib (Ramganga) with his soldiers and caparisoned elephants. The sultan ordered his eight bodyguard to cross over the river on inflated skin (*khtk*). Jaypala arrayed a detachment of his army with five elephants to resist their landing. But the Ghaznavid Soldiers plied their arrows so vigorously that elephants and detachment failed to resist them. Sultan then ordered his army to cross the river at once.¹⁹ Later in 1027AD, Sultan Mahmud himself used this tactics successfully to block the passage for the Jatts of Sind by deploying two cavalry detachments supported by elephants on both banks of the river Indus.²⁰

The later Ghaznavid commanders also dared Indian elephants. Once Amir Ayaz led expedition and seized the fort. Suddenly the Indians came out of the fort with white elephant in the front and horsemen in the rear. Amir Ayaz directed Ali Bukhari, a perfect archer, who possessed long bows (*buland Koman*) and poisoned arrows of Damascus steel (*tir-i-puladi ab dadah*), to target the elephant. Elephant's forehead was covered with *Aina-i-Chini* (protective armour). Ali Bikhari with his first blow smashed the protective armour in pieces. His second arrow came out of the head by piercing elephant's eye. The third arrow further wounded and demoralized elephant. In pain, elephant turned

back and trampled his own soldiers.²¹ In this first phase, The Ghaznavids overpowered the elephants successfully.

However, it was the Ghaznavids, among the Muslim dynasties, who first used elephants for battle in large number and who definitely assigned them a place in their tactical theory.²² The founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty Sabuktigin, on invitation of the Samanid Amir Nuh, marched against Faiq and Abu Ali Simjuri on the head of 200 elephants. In a quick demoralizing attempt the men of Faiq killed Sabuktigin's *Shahna* of elephants. Furious Sabuktigin arrayed his army with elephants in front line near Heart in 994AD. Battle resulted in rout of central Asian chiefs. Again in 995AD Sabuktigin and Mahmud confronted with Abu Ali and Faiq at Tus. Mahmud charged his war elephants who seized the mounted soldiers and then crushed them under their feet.²³

As a sultan, Mahmud confronted with Dara b. Qabus (999AD) near Merv and in battle array he placed Nasr as incharge of the right wing with 10,000 cavalry and 30 elephants, the other officer as incharge of the left wing with 12,000 cavalry and 40 elephants, while he himself commanded the centre with 10,000 cavalry and 70 elephants. The elephant corps provided Mahmud vantage to manage victory which included khurasan in his empire.²⁴

Sultan Mahmud utilised elephant's power to crush the gate of the fort of Khalaf b. Ahmad in Siestan (1002AD). In this struggle, one of Sultan's reputed elephants exerted the force of his teeth (*nab*), overthrew the gate and throw it in the air. Then in general assault, the furious elephants used their trunks to capture soldiers from the back of the horses, fling them in the air and then caught them on their steel plated tusks and the footmen were trampling to death. Consequently Khalaf surrendered the fort.²⁵

Sultan Mahmud tactically used his elephant corps in Transoxiana against the Qarakhanid Ilak Khan (1005-6AD). The Sultan ordered Arslan Jazib to chase Ilak Khan's commander Subashitigin who fled towards Bukhara and reported Ilak Khan that 'It was impossible for anyone to withstand those elephants, weapons, equipments and arms'.²⁶ Revengeful Ilak Khan crossed the oxus (1008AD) on the head of a huge army. Sultan Mahmud encamped at Katar near Balkh and calculated Ilak Khan's numerical superiority. In this perplexed situation, the Amir Abul Qasim son of Abdul Malik of Siestan dared to convince Sultan Mahmud in terms of his elephantry that although the Ghaznavid army is equal in number to the army of the Qarakhanids but advantageous with elephant corps of 1,400 elephants. Meanwhile Ahmad, the keeper (*pilwan/pilban*) of a white elephant also approached

the Sultan to inform that since last night I have tied this white elephant more than a hundred times. But every time it has loosened itself and broken the chain. It obviously an indication (good omen) of victory and success. Ahmad further assured the Sultan that 'I would surely be able to snatch the standard of the Qarakhanids on the strength of this elephant.'²⁷ The Sultan disposed his army in battle array and strengthened his front by 500 elephants to which the Turks did not understand how to fight. But Ilak Khan in a daring move, directed a furious attack on the centre with 500 Turkish slaves and desperately endeavoured to injure elephants with swords and showered arrows on the soldiers. In this state of confusion, Sultan Mahmud rode one of his personal elephants (*Al-i-khass*) and broke into the centre of Ilak Khan. One of the elephants lifting Ilak Khan's standard bearer in his trunk, hurled him into the air and then catching him on his steel clad tusks, cut the wretch in two, while others threw down riders from their horses and trample them to death. Ilak Khan managed to flee.²⁸

In an apparent move to demoralized the khans of Turkestan (Transoxiana), Sultan Mahmud crossed the river oxus in 1025AD through a temporary bridge and encamped near Samargand. He arrayed his 1000 elephants duly clad with ornaments and accoutrements. To create terror, a group of soldiers probably Indians (Hindus) were directed to make loud noise from the back of the elephants by playing with *thali* (probably cymbal, a copper plate of large and small size) and elephants' bells, blowing *sankha*, *muh-i-Saped* (winding shell) and by beating kettle-drums and military drums, big and small (*shandaf*, *banq*, *dabdabuh*, and *tabl*). However, loud and mixed noise turned the local environment insensible. The chiefs of Turkestan as well as the army were astonished and psychologically shattered.²⁹ Barthold summarised Gardezi's supra account that Mahmud's soldiers 'sang a Turkish song to a khotnese melody' by which the Turks become panicky.³⁰ But the terms *Sankha* (a sea-shell which Indians blow when riding on elephants, cf. Alberuni's India, I, 114), *Thali* (a copper vessel to which Indian beating with one and the same kind of beat, cf. Alberuni's India, I, 195) and *Aina-i-fil* (elephants' bell) clearly suggests that it was Indian soldiers or Hindu *mahouts* who sang an Indian folksong (probably Kirtan) which creates panic and terror to the Turks.

Sultan Mahmud once more used elephants to terrorise the people of Khwarizm. After defeating Mamunids (1017AD), many regicides were captured and trampled to death by elephants. Their corpses were being paraded on the streets hanging on the tusks of the elephants.³¹ Fakhr-i-Mudabbir's anecdotes mentions the seljuqid Sultan Malik

Shah's alarm when he saw his first elephant with movement of his ears, its tusks and huge body. This elephant was sent as a present by the Ghaznavid Sultan Ibrahim. Later Malik Shah was pleased when the elephant placed its head on the ground to paid obeisance.³² However, in this second phase the Ghaznavid elephant corps has gained victories and created terrors.

The later Ghaznavids introduced tactical changes, thus-unlike Sultan Mahmud his successor Sultan Masud provided elephants to his commanders. The Ghaznavid Commanders thus commanded elephants against the Seljuqids at Nasa in 1035AD. Salar Begteghdi ordered to array cavalry and infantry along with elephants, hiding weapons in their *haudaqs*. One huge and powerful elephant was leading the army as vanguard. Seljuqs however dared to confront the elephants with arrows and *Zhuqin* and created chaos but he elephants provided excellent vantage for commanders in confused fighting.³³ But later, in a changed tactics the seljuqids tried to injuring the beasts in that part which was not covered by armour, the vulnerable under-belly. In the battle of Amul, Sultan Masud's elephant was badly wounded with spears in its side abdomen.³⁴ Likewise in the battle between Sanjar and Arslan Shah b. Masud III (1115-18), the Seljuq horses were initially thrown into a panic by the fifty (120 by Ibn al-Athir) elephants of the Ghaznavids, each having four mailed spearmen and archers mounted and fastened down on their backs. However, the Sejuqid troops were able to stampede them into retreat by attacking the leading elephants' vulnerable under-belly.³⁵

Although Sultan Masud (1035AD) ordered that Turkomen prisoners should be trampled to death in the army camp by the elephants as a warning to the rest,³⁶ but Turkomen's advance towards elephants continued. Balhaqi narrates an episode that, in 1039AD, ten Turkomen horsemen dared to reach kunduz where the Ghaznavid elephants were stabled. They found a boy asleep on the neck of an elephant. The Turkomen drive the elephant away and they awoke the boy in the outer of the city and threatened to kill him if he would not drive the elephant quickly, which he agreed. Turkomen then handed elephant to their chief Daud at Saburqan. Balhaqi further records that great discredit incurred by this affair, for it was said, 'is there so much neglect amongst these men that they allow an elephant to be driven off?' When the matter was reported to Sultan Masud, he was exceedingly vexed and severely rebuked the drivers and ordered 100,000 dirhams, the price of the animal, to be recovered from them. Some of the Hindu elephant drivers were also chastised.³⁷ However in this third phase, the Ghaznavid elephantry suffered badly by daring challenge of their adversaries significantly by the seljuqid Turkomen.

Although the Ghaznavids maintained Hindu elephant keepers (*mahouts*) but Muslim *pilbanas* from Siestan were also employed. Even the Turkish soldiers were also trained to control the beasts. Gardezi informs that Ganda, the ruler of Gwalior, ceded peace by delivering 300 elephants to Sultan Mahmud. But to test the bravery of the Sultan's warriors, he sent these elephants without riders. To their astonishment Turks and soldiers however seized them and brought them to their camp.³⁴

Sabuktigin captured 200 elephants, while Sultan Mahmud captured numerous, such as 280 from Bhatia (1004 AD), 270 from Rahib (Ramganga) in 1019 AD, 30 from waihind (1002 AD), 30 from Sirsawa (1018 AD), 185 from Mahaban (1018), 350 from Qannanj (1018), 300 from Gwalior (1022 AD), 50 from Narayanpur (1009 AD), and 580 from the Raja Ganda (1019-20 AD).³⁵ The Ghaznavid commanders of Panjab also collected elephants from Indian chiefs as tribute.³⁶ Utbi informs that Sultan Mahmud's Thanesar expedition (1014-15 AD) was motivated by Mahmud's desire to get some of the special breed of *Sailmani* (probably of Ceylon) elephants regarded excellent in war. For that purpose the Ghaznavids penetrated into the ravines and large number of elephants were driven into the camp by the elephant drivers (*fayyatan*) of the Sultan.³⁷ The other contemporary chronicler Gardezi reports that the Sultan was so desirous of getting the elephant of proverbial excellence from the ruler of Sharwa Chander Rai that he offered 50 elephants in exchange. Fortunately that very elephant was found unattended, thus it was named *Khuda-dad* or, God-gifted by Gardezi and *Khudai-awurd* or, God-send by Utbi.³⁸

The Ghaznavids however must have been a large number of elephants. Among them the selected one, as a fifth share of Sultan, were trained for war and thus accommodated in the royal stables. Every year the Sultan reviewed the elephants and ordered lean and thin to be sent to India to recover their weight and strength, as the climate of their native place suited them.³⁹ Sultan Mahmud identified the plain of Shabaliar near Kabul as elephants' review ground. In 1023-24 AD, Sultan Mahmud inspected 1300 elephants, each one with equipment and armour.⁴⁰ But Utbi computes 1700 selected war elephants which were arrayed for review in the presence of the ambassadors of Turkestan. Court poet Farrukhi supported Utbi and proudly records that the Sultan paraded 1700 elephants at review ground (*Arzghah*).⁴¹ However, Minhaj-i-Siraj calculated the total number of Sultan Mahmud's elephants about 2,500.⁴² Sultan Masud reviewed 1670 war elephants at Kabul in 1031 AD.⁴³ And this number accords that mentioned by Utbi and Farrukhi. According to Baihaqi, the price of an

extraordinary elephant was 100,000 dirhems, but the expense merely of feeding these beasts must have been prodigious.⁴⁴

To accommodate these large number of huge beasts, the Ghaznavids had constructed royal stables at Ghaznin, Bami, Kunduz and utilized probably the earlier stable of Indian ruler at Qannanj. The Ghaznin stable consisted thousand enclosure, thus each and every elephant had its separate sheds with vessels (*martaban*) for their fodder.⁴⁵ It seems that the Ghaznavid royal stable was constructed on existing plan of Indian stable to which *Arthashastra* elaborates that a stable (*shala*) to be constructed double the length of the number of elephants. An entrance hall has framework of beams facing the east or north. A stall (*sthana*) for each elephants to be built square in conformity with an elephant's height, breadth and length with a smooth tying-post and plank flooring with outlets for urine and dung. Separate sheds, probably with open roof, were made in the fort for war and riding elephants.⁴⁶ If the possession of a *pilkhana* was any indicator of royalty in the struggle for power,⁴⁷ then nominal number of elephants under the possession of last two Ghaznavid Sultans in India was the main cause for the downfall of the dynasty. Minhaj-i-Siraj reports that when Shahabuddin of Ghori led expedition against the last Ghaznavid ruler Khusrav Malik in 1182, he made peace and collected only one elephant from him.⁴⁸

To tend the elephants, a hierarchy of staffs existed. Elephant keepers or drivers were to look after the beasts. A sculpture discovered from Ghaznin shows a huge elephant with driver on its neck holding a goad.⁴⁹ Each and every driver had one of his trainee (*Shagird*).⁵⁰ The *Muqaddam-i-Pilbanan* was the incharge of the elephant keepers and there was a *Shahna* or Superintendent of the royal stable (*Shahna-i-Marabti-i-Affyat*).⁵¹ Saif ad Daula Mahmud (1076 AD) had a *pilkhana* at Qannanj and appointed an Indian Jand Rai or Chand Rai as supervisor of that stable.⁵² The Hajib of the elephant corps was generally the Turkish commanders, e.g. Bilkatigin and Bun Nasr. The Hajib was the incharge of elephants' review and probably arrayed the beasts in the battle. After review, Hajib dispatched the elephants to their allotted stables. He was responsible for the distribution of *Khila'at* (*robes*) to the keepers after the completion of review.⁵³ Farrukhi, a court poet of Sultan Mahmud, praises elephants in high sounds and explicitly mentioned their names, such as *Sind*, *Singer*, *Sainber*, *Sur Bahar*, *Sur Kesar*, *Sur Manik*, *Salah*, *Sadil*, *Sajara*, *Salmjanin*, *Balah-Pasand*, *Chanil*, *Der Junbul*, *Dand Munak*, *Randah Malak*, *Kaipi*, *Malki* and *Harawan* etc.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that Sultan Mahmud named his personal elephants on the fashion of Indian custom, thus most of the names are Indianised one. A Ghaznavid poet of Lahore Masud Sad-i-Salman also wrote verses in praise of the royal elephants.⁵⁵

However, the elephants from India were an indispensable component of the Ghaznavid military expedition in Central Asia. Evidences revealed the extensive deployment of Indian elephants in military campaigns by the Ghaznavids against their Central Asian counterparts in their mutual conflicts over resources and territories. On the basis of scrutiny of the contemporary source, it has suggested that elephants were used by the Ghaznavids for the shock value; relatively unknown to their adversaries in Central Asia, thus their presence in the battle field served to create awe and terror. Later however they were deployed in systematic and organized manner in the battlefield, as an important component of the Ghaznavid army. Their deployment by the Ghaznavids provided them a decisive edge in the battle field, but once their adversaries began to challenge these war animals in the battle field, their claim to dominance disappears.

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MIRZA AZIZ KOKA KHAN-I AZAM IN THE COURT OF JAHANGIR

Reyaz Ahmad Khan

Mirza Aziz Koka was one of the principal nobles of Akbar and Jahangir's court. He enjoyed exceptional privileges under Akbar by virtue of being foster brother of the Emperor. He served the Mughal state in various capacities despite being critical of some of Akbar's measures. Being unhappy with the Emperor's religious policies, Mirza Aziz Koka departed to Mecca along with his family without seeking permission of the Emperor. During the course of his stay in Mecca, Mirza Aziz Koka wrote a very harsh letter to Akbar accusing him of denigrating Islam and claiming prophet hood.¹ After staying for 18 months in Mecca, he returned to India and was re-admitted in Imperial service; once again he became very close to the Emperor. During the closing years of Akbar's reign he, along with Raja Man Singh supported the claims of Prince Khusrav, against those of Jahangir. Thereafter, Jahangir not only pardoned all of them but also gave promotion in ranks and they were also confirmed to the offices which they held during his father's times. Mirza Aziz Koka was also pardoned and his previous rank and office were confirmed, however, after the rebellion of Khusrav (1606) Mirza Aziz Koka his relations with the Emperor became strained², Jahangir called him an "old wolf of this everlasting state"³, and Mirza Aziz Koka openly criticized Jahangir for his administrative policies.⁴ The Emperor was so much unhappy with him that on two occasions he was on the point of being awarded capital punishment but owing to the pleadings of ladies of the harem and Mirza Aziz's special relations with the Emperor Akbar, he was pardoned.⁵ Although he remained in imperial service and held the *mansab* of 7000, yet from the *Tuzuk* and other contemporary sources one gets the impressions that Mirza Aziz Koka was not among those nobles who had close association with Jahangir and with whom Emperor discussed matters relating to state administration and other subjects of his interest.

This picture of Mirza Aziz Koka comes out of the two works, viz; Afzal Husain, *The Nobility under Akbar and Jahangir*, 1999 and Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslim in Akbar's Reign*, 1975. But it may now be modified by a close study of the recently discovered report of the conversations of Jahangir *Majalis-i-Jahangiri* (published in 2006),⁶ which contains the night discourses held during 1608-11. In these assemblies Jahangir used to discuss various matters especially religion, nature of state, poetry curious